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ABSTRACT

This publication takes a look at the history of federal involvement in education, exploring how, why, and when it took shape, and the major themes that have defined this role over two centuries. The document concludes with a brief consideration of the impact of federal involvement over the years and the continuing need for a federal role. There are four main reasons why the federal government became involved in education: (1) to promote democracy; (2) to ensure equality of educational opportunity; (3) to enhance national productivity; and (4) to strengthen national defense. In pursuing these four broad goals, and other goals such as the study of educational effectiveness, the federal government has helped to achieve many positive accomplishments. However, these four reasons remain as compelling as ever, even though some of the specific objectives may have changed over the years. There is still a need for federal leadership to meet the needs of the most vulnerable children in the United States. Improving educational quality remains a national necessity and must be a national priority. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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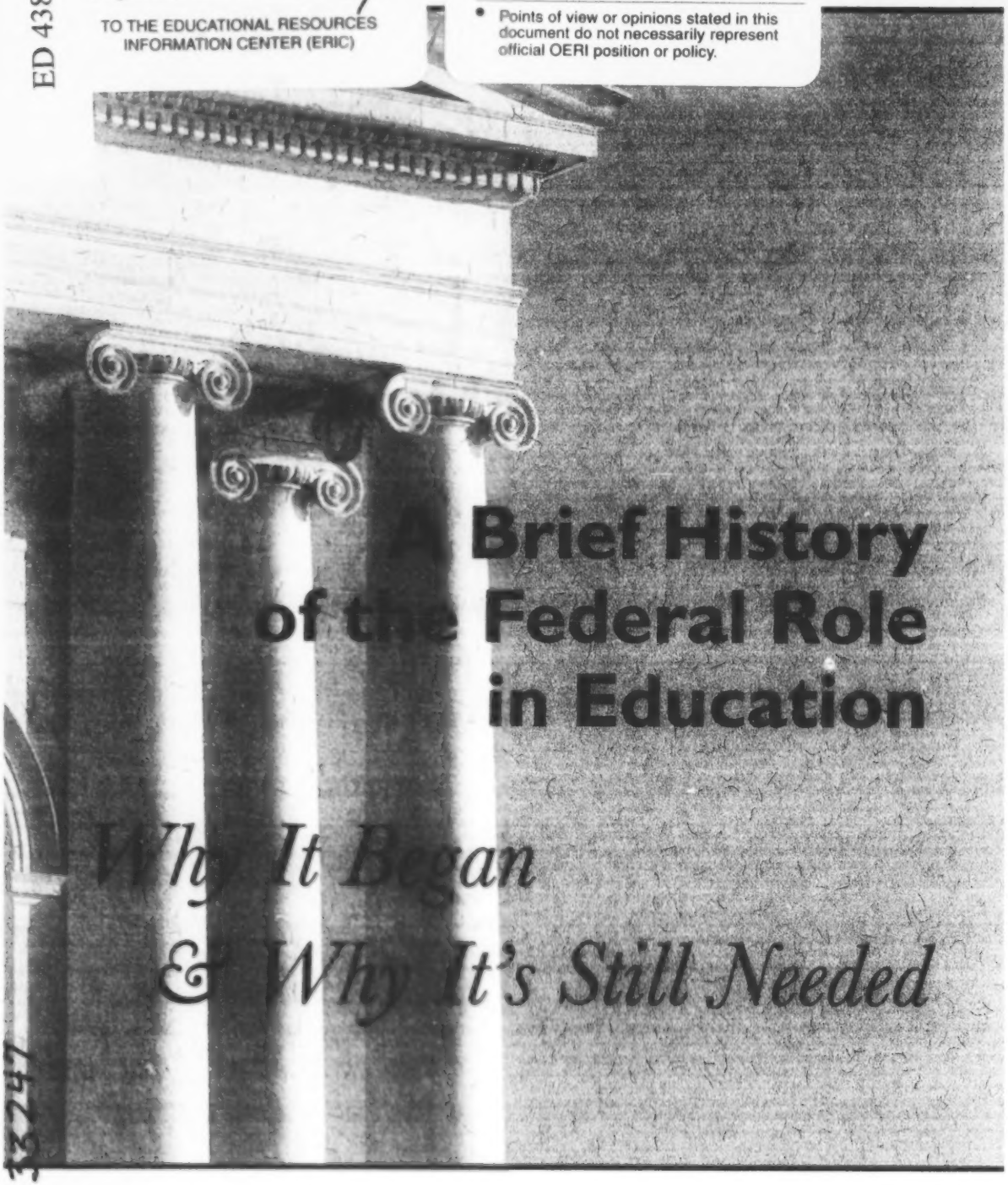

A Brief History of the Federal Role in Education

Why It Began & Why It's Still Needed

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The Center on Education Policy is the independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we try to help citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create the conditions that will lead to better public schools. The Center receives its funding from charitable foundations such as The Pew Charitable Trusts, The George Gund Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Spencer Foundation, and Phi Delta Kappa International.

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Two Centuries of Federal Involvement

In recent years there has been considerable debate about the federal role in education. Some people question whether the federal government should be involved in education at all, while others want to see federal support expanded. What's often missing from these discussions is a historical perspective. For example, many people think the federal government first became involved in education with the Great Society programs of the 1960s, when actually the first step occurred more than two centuries earlier with the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

This publication takes a historical look at the federal role in education—when, why, and how it took shape, and which major themes have defined it over two centuries. The document concludes with a brief consideration of the impact of federal involvement over the years and the continuing need for a federal role. The Center on Education Policy hopes this information will provide a historical grounding for current policy discussions.

A Federal Role in a Decentralized System

Governance in the United States is very decentralized compared with that of most other nations. Our system is based on the philosophy that government ought to be limited and that control of many public functions, such as schooling, should rest primarily with states and local communities.

Over the years, a limited but critical federal role in education has evolved within this decentralized system. The seeds of this role can be found in the writings of our nation's founders, who understood that education was essential to building a strong, unified democracy. In general, the federal government has entered the field of education when a vital national interest was not being met by states or localities, or when national leadership was required to address a national problem. The courts have usually upheld the federal role in education based on the Constitutional clause giving Congress the power to provide for the nation's "general welfare," the 14th Amendment ensuring citizens due process of law, and other legal grounds.

The federal government has always been a subordinate partner to states and localities in terms of the amount of education funding that comes directly from the federal level. The federal share of total revenues for elementary and secondary schools peaked in the late 1970s at less than 10%, and today is less than 7%. States and local school districts have retained control over curriculum content and instructional methods; in fact, federal law prohibits federal interference in these areas.

But the federal government has influenced education to a degree that goes well beyond the small share of funding provided. In recent years, to achieve greater impact, federal dollars have been heavily concentrated on certain priorities, such as educating poor children, rather than on general school support. Presidents and other national leaders have used the prominence of their office to call attention to a problem and rally people around a national goal. When the rights of

individuals are at stake, the federal government has required states and localities to take certain corrective actions.

There are four major reasons why the federal government became involved in education:

- to promote democracy;
- to ensure equality of educational opportunity;
- to enhance national productivity; and
- to strengthen national defense.

The sections below give a brief sketch of when and why federal action began in each of these areas, and which key federal programs and policies have been adopted over the years to achieve these goals. (Although federal programs often have multiple purposes, they have been categorized below according to their *primary* purpose.) The intent here is not to provide a comprehensive listing of every federal education program, but rather to highlight significant steps that shaped the federal role.

Promoting Democracy

The founders of our nation recognized that an educated, well-informed citizenry is fundamental to a democratic form of government. Educated citizens can make wiser choices about whom to elect, how to spend public funds, and which legislative measures to support. They are more likely to have civic values and habits important to a democratic society, such as respect for the views of others, the ability to cooperate and reach compromises, and a willingness to participate in the political process and perhaps become leaders themselves.

The founders also understood that our democracy would not survive long unless our diverse citizenry could forge a common sense of national identity. Unlike citizens in many other countries, who often shared the same ethnic background and a centuries-old culture, Americans would base their national identity on shared ideas, such as a belief in democracy and equality, and on the common experience of learning, working, and participating in American society.

No institution would be more crucial to developing an educated, unified citizenry than the schools of the new nation. Many forward-thinking Americans realized that it was in the national interest to establish a system of public education. Very soon after the federal government was organized, it began taking steps to help states, territories, and communities develop and expand public schools. In the 20th century, once a public education system had been established, the federal government turned its attention to improving the quality of education being provided to future citizens.

Many people think the federal government first became involved in education with the Great Society programs of the 1960s, when actually the first step occurred more than two centuries earlier with the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

Among the most notable federal actions aimed at promoting democracy were the following:

- ***Encouraging the Establishment of Public Schools.*** The federal government helped to lay the groundwork for American public education through early land settlement and statehood policies. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787, one of the first laws enacted by the federal government, was intended primarily to guide westward expansion, but it also encouraged the new territories to establish schools. Under this law, the unsettled territory of the United States was divided into townships, each consisting of 36 sections measuring one square mile. The law required one of every 36 sections to be rented out and the proceeds used to support public education—a policy that ultimately set aside 77 million acres of land for the support of public education. After the Civil War, the federal government required all new states admitted to the Union to provide free, nonsectarian public schools.

- ***Indirectly Supporting Public Schools through the Federal Tax Code.*** When the federal income tax system was established in the early 1900s, it permitted deductions for state and local taxes paid—a policy that remains in effect today. Since the vast majority of

funds for elementary and secondary education come from local property taxes, state income taxes, and sales taxes, the deductibility provisions of the federal tax code have indirectly benefitted public education by encouraging bond referenda and other state and local actions to finance schools. The deductions in the federal tax code for charitable contributions also help to support education, particularly at the postsecondary level.

- ***Improving Educational Quality.*** In the early 1980s, educational quality became a heated national issue, prompted in part by the 1983 release of *A Nation At Risk*, a federally-sponsored report that warned of declining performance in American schools. States and local districts responded with initiatives to raise student achievement. The federal government supported their efforts by keeping public attention on school reform and by providing improvement grants through such programs as the Chapter 2 education block grant and the Eisenhower teacher professional development program. In 1989, the nation's governors, led by then-Governor Bill Clinton and President Bush, agreed to a set of national education goals to guide local, state, and national school improvement efforts. By the 1990s, a movement had emerged to reform schools by setting higher standards for student learning in academic subjects. The federal government made grants to national organizations to develop model national standards in science, history, and other core subjects. Through such legislation as the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and amendments to encourage high achievement in other federal K-12 programs, the federal government supported the efforts of states and local communities to develop their own education standards and improve their schools. By the late 1990s, nearly all the states and many school districts had raised their academic standards.

Ensuring Educational Opportunity

A fundamental principle of our democracy is the right of every citizen to participate equitably in public education. Ensuring educational opportunity has been a primary motive for the federal role in education since the 1950s. In some cases, federal action has come from the judiciary, in the form of court decisions to protect citizens' Constitutional rights in education, or from the executive branch, in the form of civil rights enforcement efforts. Congress has played a role by passing laws to prohibit discrimination in education based on race, gender, or disability, and to improve education for groups whose needs have sometimes been neglected, such as poor children and students with disabilities.

Key federal actions to ensure equal educational opportunity include the following:

- ***Protecting Constitutional Rights.*** One of the first and most important steps toward equal opportunity was the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, which struck down laws endorsing racial segregation in public schools in 17 states and the District of Columbia. A decade later, citizens' rights were reaffirmed with passage of the federal Civil Rights Act, which prohibited discrimination in education on the basis of race, national origin, and certain other factors. Also significant was the enactment and enforcement of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibited discrimination against students on the basis of gender.

- ***Improving Education for Students with Special Needs.*** A very significant step in the development of a federal education role took place in the 1960s, when Americans began to realize that many poor and disadvantaged children were not receiving an adequate education. As part of President Johnson's War on Poverty, the Congress enacted two key laws that remain cornerstones of the federal role today. The first, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, provided aid to states and school districts to improve education for children from low-income families and

meet other critical education needs. The second, the Higher Education Act of 1965, opened the door to postsecondary education for those who could not afford it. Later amendments to these laws have addressed educational opportunities for other groups with special needs, such as children with limited English proficiency, migrant children, and Native American students. The rights of children with disabilities to a free and appropriate public education were affirmed in the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). This legislation also provides federal financial assistance to states and school districts to help cover the extra costs of educating children with disabilities.

Enhancing National Productivity

Our national economic productivity depends on the existence of a broad base of citizens with solid literacy and work skills, as well as an adequate supply of highly-educated people who can be managers, leaders, thinkers, or innovators. A nation of economically prosperous citizens is also more likely to be politically and socially stable. As early as the mid-1800s, the federal government began to take steps to prepare citizens for the workforce and expand their opportunities for study or training beyond high school. Key federal actions to enhance productivity include the following:

- ***Helping States to Establish Colleges and Universities.*** Most of the colleges in existence during the early years of our nation were private institutions offering a classical education of Latin, Greek, literature, and mathematics. By the mid-1800s, however, many Americans had begun to press for a more practical curriculum that would prepare young people for highly-skilled jobs in a growing nation. States began to establish public colleges and universities. The federal government encouraged this process through the Morrill Act of 1862, which made grants of federal land available to states to establish "land-grant colleges" offering agricultural and engineering courses. Among the many institutions assisted through this Act were Cornell University, Massachusetts

Institute of Technology, Pennsylvania State University, Purdue University, and University of California. Today the federal government provides grants and contracts to colleges and universities for a wide range of activities that contribute to national productivity—from conducting aeronautical research to increasing the milk output of cows.

- ***Supporting Vocational Education and Work-Related Training.*** During the early years of the 20th century, it became apparent that the U.S. lacked trained workers to fill new jobs in industry and agriculture. Through the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, the federal government tried to meet this need by encouraging communities to establish vocational and agricultural courses in secondary schools. This legislation provided federal matching funds to pay the salaries of teachers of vocational courses; later amendments made federal aid available to train teachers in vocational and agricultural areas. The federal government continues to support vocational and technical training programs at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Another significant worker training program was the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1918, which made grants available to disabled World War I veterans for rehabilitation through vocational training. This legislation has been expanded over the years to help millions of disabled Americans lead more productive lives.

The federal government has entered the field of education when a vital national interest was not being met by states or localities, or when national leadership was required to address a national problem.

- ***Increasing Access to Higher Education.*** Several federal programs have sought to increase productivity by expanding access to higher education among those who might not otherwise have afforded it. A very influential program was the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, better known as the G.I. Bill, which provided grants for a college education to veterans returning from World War II and at the same time helped to prepare people for skilled

jobs in the postwar economy. Today, the Montgomery G.I. Bill provides similar grants for higher education for active military personnel and veterans—which benefits the economy when the participants retire from the military and enter the civilian workforce. Other programs to make college more accessible included the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which authorized the first federal loans to students for higher education, and the College Work Study program, which encouraged higher education institutions to create jobs for students to earn money for college tuition. Federal Pell Grants, enacted in 1972, assist financially needy students with college costs. Two recent programs, the Hope Scholarship program and the Lifetime Learning Tax Credit, offer various kinds of federal tax relief to middle-class families for the costs of college tuition.

Strengthening National Defense

As part of its responsibility for defending the nation, the federal government has a direct stake in developing an educated citizenry. Educated citizens are a vital component of military preparedness. They are less likely to be swayed by enemies of the nation and constitute a valuable resource to draw upon during times of war and international conflict. The federal government has acknowledged the link between education and national defense through such policies as requiring new enlistees in the armed forces to have a high school diploma or its equivalent, and establishing military academies to train leaders. The Montgomery G.I. Bill, mentioned above, also contributes to national defense by improving the level of training of our armed forces.

Several other federal initiatives over the past 50 years have tried to strengthen national defense through education. Among them are the following:

- ***Improving Mathematics and Science Instruction.*** In 1957, when the U.S.S.R. launched Sputnik, the first space satellite, many Americans feared this was a signal that the Soviets were winning the Cold War and would use their scientific prowess to develop new and more

powerful weapons. School systems in the U.S. responded by beefing up courses in mathematics and science. The federal response was to enact the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which provided funds to states and school districts to improve the teaching of math, science, and foreign languages. In recent years, concerns have persisted about the lackluster performance of U.S. students in math and science. The federal government has continued to play a role through such efforts as the education programs of the National Science Foundation and the Eisenhower Professional Development program, which funds projects to improve teacher skills in math and science.

As early as the mid-1800s, the federal government began to take steps to prepare citizens for the workforce and expand their opportunities for study or training beyond high school.

- ***Feeding Hungry Children.*** A preponderance of undernourished World War II draftees led the federal government to establish the National School Lunch program shortly after the war. The goal was to provide adequate nourishment to young people, so they would grow into adults who were physically able to serve in the military or in defense industries. The program had the additional benefit of creating an outlet for surplus agricultural products that the federal government was buying from farmers. Over time, the rationale for the school lunch program and other child nutrition programs has changed from a defense argument to an educational one, based on research showing that hungry children have difficulty learning.

Other Reasons for a Federal Role in Education

The four reasons discussed above are not the only motives for federal involvement in education. For example, for more than 130 years, the federal government has gathered national data on education as a way to assess how well our education system is faring. From the advent of television to the expansion of the Internet, the federal government has helped schools acquire and apply new technologies for teaching and learning. In school districts where the presence of tax-exempt federal installations and land makes it difficult to raise local revenues for education, the federal government provides general aid for education. The federal government also provides support to educate populations for whom there is a special federal responsibility, including Native American students and dependents of military personnel stationed overseas.

The Impact of the Federal Role

In pursuing the four broad goals described above, the federal government has helped to accomplish many positive things. Examples include the following:

- Every community has public schools open to all students, and every state has public colleges and universities available to those who want to pursue advanced education.

- During the 1990s, 48 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have established high academic content standards to improve teaching and learning. During roughly this same time, the percentage of students taking a challenging academic curriculum has increased.

- Through the G.I. Bill enacted after World War II, nearly 8 million veterans received advanced education and training. As a result of having a better trained workforce, the federal government received from two to eight times as much in income taxes as it

paid out in those benefits. Today, over 20 million veterans have participated in all the various G.I. bills that have been enacted since 1944, and the nation continues to receive a healthy return on its investment.

- The era of legal racial segregation of students came to an end. Since then, the educational attainment of African Americans has risen. For example, in 1950, only 24% of African Americans ages 25 to 29 had completed at least four years of high school; by 1997, the figure had increased to 87%. In 1950, 3% of African Americans ages 25 to 29 had completed four or more years of college; by 1997, the comparable figure was 14%.

Very soon after the federal government was organized, it began taking steps to help states, territories, and communities develop and expand public schools.

- As a result of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, women not only have more opportunities to participate in sports, but they also have made considerable academic accomplishments. For example, in 1971, only 18% of women had completed four or more years of college, compared with 26% of men. By 1994, men and women were completing bachelor's degrees at the same rate of 27%. The number of women completing professional degree programs, such as law and medical school, has also increased dramatically since the early 1970s.

- More resources are being devoted to educating low-income children. According to the General Accounting Office, for every dollar spent on elementary and secondary education funding for all students, the federal government provided an additional $4.73 per low-income student, while states targeted only an additional 62 cents per low-income student.

- Children with disabilities are receiving services tailored to their special needs, are being identified at greater rates, and are participating in regular classrooms for much of their learning time.

These trends stand in marked contrast to the situation prior to 1975, when the special needs of children with disabilities were not being effectively met; when many disabilities went undetected despite students' difficulties in learning; and when nearly 13% of all children with disabilities were excluded entirely from the public education system.

- Federally subsidized loans and grants have made higher education widely available. About 70% of total aid to students for post-secondary study comes directly or indirectly from federal sources.

Continued Need for a Federal Role

These four basic reasons for federal involvement remain compelling, even as states have assumed a much more active role in education reform. At a time when voter participation is down and our population is becoming more diverse, it is still in the national interest to educate young people to become responsible citizens who can get along with each other. Poverty has not gone away, and drugs, violence, abuse and other social problems are placing greater strains on schools and families. There is still a need for federal leadership to meet the educational needs of our most vulnerable children. In a world that is economically interdependent but has several spots of political unrest, improving educational quality remains a top priority for several reasons, not the least of which are economic competitiveness and military preparedness. In short, the federal government is uniquely positioned to mobilize a national effort and encourage state and local action whenever a critical educational need arises.

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